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ABSTRACT

Country schools were important in the growth and development of North Dakota. While most of the early schools were constructed of wood, some were constructed of stone, sod, or logs. Standardization was established by 1915, and the white framed one-room school was duplicated in every township of the state until the end of World War II. A former student described his school as a simple frame structure about 20 by 30 feet; a barn and outhouses were on the schoolgrounds; inside, the school was equipped with desks for the children and teacher, a pot-bellied stove, and a bucket of water and dipper. The number of one-room schools dramatically decreased between 1945 and 1961, from 3,043 to 817 actually in session. Although consolidation of rural schools in North Dakota was largely postponed between the World Wars, its basic thrust was established by 1918. Neil Macdonald, with 25 years' public school experience, was consolidation's foremost advocate. Recommendations made in 1912 by a newly formed Rural School Commission formed the basis of much state legislation over the next two decades. William Langer, a state's attorney, provided leadership in educational law enforcement. The one-room school and the consolidated country school served North Dakota's educational needs for decades. (Author/CM)

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COUNTRY SCHOOL LEGACY:

Humanities on the Frontier

THE COUNTRY SCHOOL AS AN HISTORIC SITE

AND THE MOVEMENT TO IMPROVE RURAL SCHOOLS IN NORTH DAKOTA

BY

Dan Rylance

Grand Forks, North Dakota

March, 1981

Funded by the National Endowment for the Humanities

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COUNTRY SCHOOL LEGACY: HUMANITIES ON THE FRONTIER

The Mountain Plains Library Association is pleased to be involved in this project documenting the country school experience. Funding of this project from the National Endowment for the Humanities, cost sharing and other contributions enabled us all to work with the several state-based Humanities Committees as well as many other state and local libraries, agencies and interested citizens. We are deeply impressed not only by the enthusiasm for this work by all concerned but by the wealth of experience brought to bear in focusing attention on—and recapturing—this important part of history, and how we got here. This project seems to identify many of the roots and "character formation" of our social, political and economic institutions in the West.

Already the main Project objective seems to be met, stimulating library usage and increasing circulation of historical and humanities materials in this region. Public interest is rising in regional, state and local history. Oral history programs are increasing with greater public participation. The study of genealogy—and the search for this information—is causing much interest in consulting—and preserving—historical materials. What has been started here will not end with this project. The immediate results will tour the entire region and be available for any who wish the program, film, and exhibit. There will be more discussion of—and action on—the issues involving the humanities and public policies, past and present. The Mountain Plains Library Association is proud to be a partner in this work, the Country School Legacy, and its contribution to understanding humanities on the frontier.

Joseph J. Anderson
Nevada State Librarian
Past President
Mountain Plains Library Association

Country schools were an important institution in the growth and development of North Dakota. From the earliest days of settlement, the small white frame schoolhouse stood as a lonely ship on a sea of prairie grass. The country school symbolized both continuity and change for all engaged in the process of settlment. For the seasoned older American used to moving further west every few years, the school stood for continuity. It symbolized the continual reestablishment of a basic pattern of American civilization from the East Coast through the old Northwest and now onto to the Great Plains. For the newly arrived Norwegian or German-Russian, the school stood for change. It offered hope for the beginning of a new life and the promise of success. It also epitomized, however, a new civilization and the inevitable process of Americanization.

Country schools were a common sight on the prairie landscape of North Dakota. Although wood construction was most common, early records compiled by the State Superintendent of Public Instruction indicate a variety of building materials. In 1894, 273 schools were built in North Dakota. Of that total, 263 were frame, 5 were stone, 1 was sod and 4 were of log construction. By 1906, North Dakota had 3,700 schools. Of that total, 3,554 were frame, 103 were stone or brick, 9 were sod and 34 were of log construction. By 1914-1915, the last year that such statistics were compiled, North Dakota had 5,150 frame, 252 stone or brick and 19 log or stone schools.

While the earliest participants of the country school legacy experienced some variety of construction and architecture, later generations did not. Standardization was established by the second decade of the 20th Century. Planbooks for the construction of schools and the passage of state laws aimed at uniformity promulgated by the State Superintendent and administered by the state's 53 county superintendents, carried out the process. Yet, if

standardization eliminated this local variety of architecture, it also established a common legacy which was experienced by virtually all rural school children over the next 30 years. The common scene of the white framed one-room school within walking distance of the family farm was duplicated in every township of the state from 1915 until the end of World War II.

This standard one-room school is well documented in the wide selection of photographs collected, identified, and preserved for this project. It is also preserved through the memory and pen of C. Ross Bloomquist, a retired chemical engineer, now living in Carrington, North Dakota. Bloomquist, with the eye of a chemist and the pen of a poet captures in prose the unforgetable scene of the one-room schoolhouse in Foster County.

> The Birtsell No. 3 schoolhouse was old even when I started in the first grade in the Spring of 1914.
>
> The schoolhouse yard of somewhat more than an acre was virgin prairie not absolutely level since the northeast corner next to the quarter line collected water after a heavy rain or during the spring thaws. During vacation time many species of prairie flowers managed to grow and bloom in spite of the childrens' efforts to wear out the grasses and plants during playtime. Among the flowers blooming in the summer there were two types of legumes or vetches with pale purple blossoms and bean-like pods which I never encountered elsewhere. We called them "buffalo beans."
>
> Besides the schoolhouse there were three other structures on the school grounds. The ramshackle barn near the south boundary had in years past stabled the horses of children who rode or drove to school....In the distance past it had been painted red but most of the color had long since weathered away....We played in the

barn occasionally on rainy days but its main use was as a place to hide behind during recess and noon time hide-and-go-seek games. The two outhouses, boys' and girls', were situated along the west boundary of the school yard. The girls' was directly west of the schoolhouse and the boys' about 30 feet further south. The rear of the two little houses also served as hiding places during games.

The schoolhouse itself was a simple frame structure about 20 by 30 feet with a single gable roof with a belfry at the east end. The windowless entry facing east also had a smaller gabled roof. The exterior had been painted white with red trim around the windows, eaves and corners. It was never repainted during my days there. Both the north and south side had two windows placed symmetrically, the east wall had two flanking the entry. The west wall was blank except for the brick chimney protruding from the west gable.

The entry, windowless, except for the transom above the door, had hooks and nails to hang coats and caps. The lunch pails were set on the floor before the cold of winter set in. A small bench held a water pail with a dipper and the wash basin we all used. There was a hole in the ceiling through which there should have been the rope attached to the bell. The rope had long since worn out and was never replaced.

In spite of the windows on three sides of the interior, the schoolroom was dark and uninviting when school was not in session. The wood walls and ceiling painted a bluish gray were sometimes cleaned but never repainted during my years in attendance. No permanent pictures relieved the monotony of the dull walls. The floor was dark and splintery. A six inch high platform projected

about five feet from the west wall. It stuck out a little farther in the center to give just enough space for the teacher's desk and the wastepaper basket.

A huge shiny black circular coal stove occupied a considerable portion of the north wall. I have never seen another quite like it. Basically it was a large pot-bellied stove enclosed in a sheet casing about five feet in diameter and the same height. The cast iron doors of the fire box and ash pit were flush with the case. Sharp, serrated or crown-like points decorated the upper edge of the case. Around the bottom at floor level vents which could be opened or closed by slides controlled the flow of heat around the fire box so that the room was heated by convection as well as radiation. The casing itself was a protection for the children; it never became too hot to touch. No child was ever burned by coming into contact with the stove. Within the casing the dome over the fire box had a flat top. In winter when the stove was in use water in a pan or pot set on it would come to boil in a few minutes. The hot lunches were prepared there.

The pipe from the stove to the chimney came out only a few inches from the north wall. Protective metal plates shielded the pipe from the wall and ceiling. In a year the paint on the shields would become blistered by the hot gases radiating from the stovepipe. The shields failed to protect the walls one night in 1929, the walls caught fire and the building burned.

The stovepipe angled across the room to the chimney in the center of the west wall. The base of the chimney was supported on a wood platform about six feet above the floor. A cupboard under the platform was used to store spare text books. Slate blackboards on either side of the cupboard occupied the rest of the west wall. Several composition

boards were attached to the other walls.

The teacher's desk on the platform was placed so that she faced the children sitting at their desks. The desk had a shallow center drawer where she kept her records. Chalk and supplies for handiwork and her personal belongings filled the side drawers. A row of text books held in place by bookends were lined up on the side of the desk toward the children. Six kindergarten-size chairs stood in a row on the platform to the right of the teacher's desk. The children sat in these chairs when they were reciting.

The pupil's desks of the combination type were new the fall before I started school. They were bright and shiny with a heavy durable coat of varnish which resisted the childrens' efforts to mar them. The backs and seats were light colored wood, the cast iron metal frames were black. The desk tops were reddish brown with a groove for holding pencils and a never used ink well. Below the sloping tops each desk had a level shelf large enough to hold a half dozen text books, a few pencils, tablets of writing paper, crayons, and a paint box. Most of the desks had a hinged seat in front so that they could be arranged in files from front to back. There were in all about 25 desks of graduated sizes to fit all from the tiny first graders to the near adult eighth grade pupils. The arrangement of the desks depended on the teacher's wishes. Usually they were screwed to the floor in 3 or 4 files with the seated children facing the blackboards on the west wall. One teacher liked the desks of similar sizes paired to allow for wider aisles.

Compared to the classrooms of modern schools Birtsell No. 3 was a rather dreary place when school was not in session. The teachers did all they could to liven the atmosphere. They made

curtains to cover the bottom third of the lower sashes on the windows. Colorful pictures drawn or traced by the primary children were tacked along the walls and blackboards. On sunny days the light pouring in the east and south windows made splashes of glaring illumination of the floor and desks. The light reflecting from the shiny desk tops made bright spots here and there on the walls and ceilings and sometimes in the eyes of the children. On cloudy days the light coming in from three sides made dark and light areas haphazardly across the room changing as the day progressed. In midwinter the sun was near setting by the time school closed for the day and the room was becoming immersed in shadow.

The total number of one-room schools in North Dakota is shown in the following table.

Year	Number	
1917	4,722	
1924	4,441	
1930	4,577	
1935	4,732	
1940	4,658	(3,392)
1945	4,553	(3,043)
1950	4,108	(2,657)
1955	3,795	(2,355)
1961	1,963	(817)
1972	38	
1978	22	

( ) = actual number in session

By 1940 the biennial report of the Department of Public Instruction began to differentiate between the physical number of one-room schools and the actual number of one-room schools in session. Both the physical number and actual number of one-room schools began to dramatically decrease between 1945 and 1960.

In 1972 there were only 38 one-room schools in North Dakota educating a total of 386 students. In 1978, the last year figures are available, there were 22 one-room schools educating 156 students.

A more in-depth analysis can be found by looking at school districts in Barnes County. Located in east-central North Dakota, on the western edge of the Red River Valley, the following tables document the growth and decline of school districts in Barnes County.

GROWTH OF SCHOOL DISTRICTS IN BARNES COUNTY

Year	Number
1879	3
1880	6
1881	18
1882	24
1883	25
1884	3
1885	3
1888	3
1889	2
1893	2
1894	1
1895	1
1904	2
1905	1
1906	1
1907	1
1909	1
1910	1
1914	1
1933	2

DECLINE OF SCHOOL DISTRICTS IN BARNES COUNTY

Year	Number
1909	2
1912	2
1914	3
1915	3
1916	3
1923	1
1952	3
1954	17
1955	2
1956	2
1957	10
1958	14
1959	4
1961	1
1962	5
1963	7
1964	3
1966	3
1967	1
1970	2
1971	1
1972	1
1973	1
1974	2
1978	1
1980	1

The first table on growth indicates that the organization of school districts in Barnes County was virtually completed by the end of the 1880s. The second table on decline documents no significant retrenchment until the 1950s. It is also interesting to note that no school districts were eliminated in Barnes County for 29 years between 1923 and 1952. In 1981, Barnes County has only 5 school districts; Valley City, Oriska, Litchville, Dazey and Wimbledon.

While the growth and decline of school districts are not synonymous with the exact number of one-room schools, they are parallel. The tables on growth and decline of school districts in Barnes County are similar to the decline of one-room schools in North Dakota. For the actual number of one-room schools in Barnes County see the county breakdown of one-room

schools from 1917-1978 attached to this essay.

The historical development of the one-room school in North Dakota, however, was not entirely a positive experience. School educators, educational associations, rural school commissions and state's attorneys all saw weaknesses in the one-room school experience and took educational and legal steps to improve all aspects of it. In time, improvement of one-room schools became synonymous with the movement to consolidate rural schools. Although consolidation of rural schools in North Dakota was largely postponed because of the Years of Despair between World War I and World War II, its basic thrust was established by 1918.

Presentist arguments for a return to the basics and today's nostalgia for one-room schools must be balanced with a deeper understanding of the rural consolidation movement. One-room schools and rural consolidated schools together best illustrate the legacy of country schools in North Dakota. Moreover, the contribution of consolidation to the legacy of country schools is best understood through the work of its leading spokesman, Neil C. Macdonald.

Neil Carnot Macdonald was born on Manitoulin Island, Ontario in 1876. The son of Scot-Canadian pioneers who emigrated to Cavalier county in northeastern Dakota Territory in 1885, Macdonald was raised in a twelve by sixteen foot sod shanty that in time housed a family of six brothers and two sisters.

Neil Macdonald devoted his life to the betterment of public education in his adopted state. He started teaching in a one-room school near his home in 1892 at the age of sixteen. By 1900, he had risen to the position of Superintendent of Schools for Cavalier county. Between 1903 and 1909 he served as Superintendent of Schools in Lidgerwood, in southeastern North Dakota and filled a comparable position in Mandan on the Missouri River,

the following year. During the summer of 1911, Macdonald was appointed state inspector of elementary schools, continuing in that capacity until elected State Superintendent of Public Instruction in 1916.

Macdonald had graduated from Mayville Normal School in 1896 and completed his B.A. and M.A. training at the University of North Dakota. He later obtained an Ed.D. degree from Harvard University in 1921, after having completed a dissertation on "Rural Schools and Rural Public Consolidation" based on his twenty-five years of familiarity and experience with public instruction in the state.

Macdonald believed that the most pressing educational problem in North Dakota was "how to secure and maintain efficient rural schools." He possessed a genius for compiling and publicizing statistics that told a simple story--namely, that 72 percent of school age children in the state lived on farms and attended one-room schools and that 60 percent of teachers in those schools had failed to complete a single high school level course. Even more striking was the fact that just 33 percent of the 80,000 farm children in North Dakota ever finished the eighth grade and only 5 percent graduated from high school. These statistics stood in stark contrast to their urban counterparts, where fully 81 percent achieved the eighth grade and 30 percent obtained a high school diploma.

Macdonald's crusade, however, to implement his rural school consolidation program was frustrated by those opposed to change and his own political involvement. In 1916, Macdonald joined the burgeoning NonPartisan League and won election as State Superintendent of Public Instruction. His plans, however, for a progressive education system soon became linked to radical causes and ideals in the League platform. He suffered a humiliating defeat in the fall election of 1918, at the hands of Minnie J. Nielson, Superintendent of Schools for Barnes county. Republican conservatives

accused Macdonald of socialism and "with corrupting the state's children with socialist books." His plans for needed reform were "twisted into a sinister move to subvert the schools and to wreck the colleges, especially the university." Macdonald's defeat, according to Elwyn Robinson's, History of North Dakota, was more than a political disappointment:

> The state had replaced a dynamic leader and nationally recognized authority on rural education with a county superintendent who was not even a college graduate and hence could not qualify for the state's highest teacher's certificate. It was a misfortunate for both the rural schools and the farm boys, whose welfare was so close to Macdonald's heart.

It also was a misfortune for Macdonald. He died at Glasgow, Montana, on September 8, 1923, of uremic poisoning while enroute to Seattle Pacific College where he had accepted a deanship. Still bitter over his political battles and defeat, he earlier declared his reasons for foresaking his adopted state.

> Left North Dakota, 9-1-1921, for Spokane or Seattle to seek my fortune in the Far West, to begin anew as a schoolman after being despoiled by the crooked politicians in North Dakota. It means for the present, at least, setting sail from the port of blasted hopes and political crooks upon an uncharted sea for the port of missing men.

The background for Macdonald's program to improve rural education came from his own experiences in North Dakota and his own continuing education. The catalyst, however, for specific suggestions was a general session of the North Dakota Educational Association in the fall of 1911. In his address, as outgoing president, entitled, "A Square Deal for the Country Boy" Macdonald unfolded his plan.

As the title of the speech suggested, Macdonald asserted that the country boy in North Dakota had not been given the same educational opportunities as his city cousins. In particular, the country boy was physically overworked on the farm which resulted in less than ten percent of rural males attending

upper elementary grades regularly. The country boy was also denied recreational opportunities and Macdonald argued that play was "the birthright of all children and the lonely overworked country boy in particular."

The country boy often was the educational by-product of "unqualified teachers" who taught in "poorly heated" schools fashioned "unintentionally, of course, for the rapid multiplication of disease germs." Finally, the country boy unlike his city cousin lacked horizontal mobility: "to insist that all boys must stay, live, and die upon the farm is ground far distant from that on which a square deal rests. It is un-American."

Macdonald tempered his criticisms with positive solutions. He urged rural parents "to work the boy less" and "to pay higher taxes for education." He urged the educational association to lobby for a compulsory medical inspection bill and a compulsory attendance law. He proposed consolidation of one-room schools as well as "longer terms, better teachers and a modern school building." He dreamed of a new day when a square deal for the country boy would be a reality in every county:

> Behold him securely established in his inalienable rights of health, of body and wealth of mind and character to joyous days of play and pleasant work, to good schools and better teachers, and to the opportunity to respond to the ever insistent call to a higher and better manhood.

The appointment of a Rural School Commission was approved by resolution at the close of the 1911 meeting of the North Dakota Educational Association. The Commission was charged with the responsibility to "recommend effective measures for the permanent uplift of the rural schools in the state." Neil C. Macdonald was appointed chairman. The other four members of the Commission included C. R. Travis, Vice President of Mayville Normal School; Minnie J. Nielson, Barnes County Superintendent of Schools; Wesley C. McDowell, banker and state senator from Marion, North Dakota and C. B. Waldron, professor of Horticulture and Forestry at North Dakota Agriculture College, Fargo, North Dakota.

The special commission made its report to the association at its 1912 meeting in Grand Forks. The report identified 9 unfavorable conditions in the rural schools of North Dakota:

1. Short terms and poor attendance.
2. Poorly qualified and underpaid teachers.
3. Insufficient supervision.
4. Inadequate financial support.
5. Unsuitable school buildings and grounds.
6. Lack of proper means to fully satisfy the civic-social life interest.
7. Lack of proper adjustment of courses of study and text books to meet the needs of the time.
8. Too many conflicting interests in public school management.
9. The absence in many quarters of genuine interest in and sympathy with rural progress.

The commission made six major recommendations which formed the basis of much proposed state legislation over the next two decades. The major recommendations included: longer terms and better attendance, better financial support, school board organization, consolidation, improved supervision and better teaching and a campaign of education for rural school uplift.

Until his defeat for re-election as superintendent of public instruction in 1918, Macdonald worked relentlessly to improve rural schools in North Dakota. He compared by use of photographs the ox cart of the pioneer to the steam locomotive, the sod shanty claim to the modern farm house and the one-room rural school to the modern open-country consolidated school. Although there were only 152 consolidated schools in the country in 1918, Macdonald said "there could be altogether over 1,500." He asserted that progress,

however, was being made and "soon the one-room rural school will disappear as did the ox cart and the sod shanty."

When Macdonald left office, the State Department of Public Instruction had identified 6 major and 25 specific benefits of the rural consolidated school over the one-room rural school:

SIX MAJOR BENEFITS

1. Better attendance - A nine-month term with 75 percent attendance instead of a seven and eight-tenths month term with 54 percent attendance as in the average rural school.
2. Better teachers - Well trained teachers teaching a good school in place of a poorly trained teacher keeping a poor rural school.
3. Better school work in the grades - Three times the number completing the eighth grade and doing work of twice the quality when compared with the results of the one-room rural school.
4. Better high school privileges - Ten times the number of country pupils completing the high school and at one-fifteenth the cost to the individual patron when compared with the old rural school system.
5. Better organization - A teacher with three grades and 15 classes daily instead of six grades and 30 classes and 15 visits per year of a supervisor instead of two as in the one-room school system.
6. Better civic-social opportunities - A good place for various clubs, literary societies, social events, athletic contests, lectures, and art exhibits which the rural school has not.

TWENTY-FIVE SPECIFIC BENEFITS

1. Increases the attendance.
2. Makes the attendance more regular.
3. Increases the enrollment.
4. Keeps the older pupils in the school longer.

5. Provides high school privileges at one-third the cost to the community and one-fifteenth the cost to the individual patron.

6. Makes possible the securing of better trained teachers.

7. Improves industrial conditions in the country, including improved roads and farms.

8. Results in higher salaries for better trained teachers.

9. Makes possible more and better grade school work.

10. Enriches the civic-social life activities.

11. Conserves more largely the health and morals of the children.

12. Increases the number of eighth grade completions.

13. Provides adequate supervision.

14. Reduces truancy and tardiness.

15. Develops better school spirit.

16. Gives more time for recitations.

17. Increases the value of real estate.

18. Produces greater pride and interest in country life.

19. Prevents the drift to the larger towns and cities.

20. Brings more and better equipped buildings.

21. Eliminates the small, weak school.

22. Creates a school of greater worth, dignity and usefulness.

23. Makes possible a more economical school.

24. Provides equal educational opportunities.

25. Gives much greater and better results in every way.

William Langer, a fledgling state's attorney in Morton County from 1915-1916 accomplished on the local level what Macdonald was urging on the state level. In the fall of 1915, Langer conducted an extensive investigation of public schools in Morton county. He spent the better part of a month going from schoolhouse

to schoolhouse investigating the attendance of school children and other matters. He found "4,625 children were absent daily and 2,100 children in Morton county were not even enrolled." He told the editor of the New Leipzig Sentinel that the county had "one of the poorest school systems in North Dakota," and began a vigorous effort to enforce all existing statutes on education.

In November of 1915, Langer notified over 800 households of his intention to enforce the new compulsory attendance law. The statute required that children must attend school when in session up to the age of sixteen. He gave parents only five days to get their children in school. In the meantime, he wrote every teacher in the county requesting the names of those students not attending school. Langer also sought to enforce laws on transportation and mandatory fire breaks around schoolhouses. Finally the young state's attorney enforced the displaying of the American flag on all schoolhouses in the large and sprawling county recently claimed by many German emigrants from Russia.

The leadership of Macdonald at the state level and the law enforcement of Langer at the local level to improve the quality of rural education was matched by the support of others. In particular, the state's 53 county superintendents served as a liaison between the state office and local teachers. County superintendents collected an immense amount of data, offered advice and leadership to teachers and generally worked for the betterment of rural schools in North Dakota. Departments of education at the University of North Dakota and the Agriculture College as well as Normal Schools at Mayville, Valley City, Minot, and Dickinson contributed to teacher workshops each fall, and summer institutes as well as their regular task of educating teachers.

The one-room country school and the consolidated country school served the needs of public education in North Dakota for several decades. The one built on the other and together they contributed to a standard educational experience shared by two or three generations of rural children in North Dakota.

NOTES ON ESSAY

All statistics on the types of one one room schools and the number of one room schools were compiled from the Biennial Reports of the Superintendent of Public Instruction. The essay by C. Ross Bloomquist was obtained by the author for inclusion in the country school materials for this project. The specific school statistics on Barnes County were donated by Harold Lewis, County Superintendent of Schools for Barnes County. The research on Neil C. Macdonald was obtained from two secondary sources Elwyn B. Robinson's History of North Dakota 1966 and Lewis Geiger's University of the Northern Plains: A History of the University of North Dakota: 1883-1958, 1958 and my own research on Chester Fritz who was a nephew of Macdonald. The state program to improve the quality of rural education and to consolidate rural schools are identified in the text of the essay and can easily be found in state documents published by the Department of Public Instruction. The discussion of William Langer's activities was gleaned from Ron Olson "William Langer's Rise to Political Prominence in North Dakota" M.A. thesis, University of North Dakota, 1967; Elaine Weber "William Langer: the Progressive Attorney General (1917-1920)," M.A. thesis, University of North Dakota, 1967 and Dan Rylance "William Langer and the Themes of North Dakota History" South Dakota History 3 (Winter 1972), 41-62.